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SUBJECT: ARVN VETERANS TODAY

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1. (U) Summary: The day to day differences between the lives of veterans of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and other Vietnamese citizens are slight in most of Vietnam today. An atmosphere of latent mistrust and lingering hostility still exists in some poorer areas. Geography and economic development appear to be the most important variables in explaining the differences in treatment of ARVN veterans -- the more economic transformation and growth a community has experienced, the less its local authorities seem to worry about former soldiers of "the old regime." In the rapidly developing urban areas of Vietnam, ARVN veterans experience little or no discrimination. In contrast, veterans in central Vietnam and more isolated parts of the Mekong Delta where poverty is prevalent often face discrimination from hostile and uncooperative local officials. The most commonly cited problem among ARVN veterans is difficulty in obtaining civil documents. ARVN veterans also complain that "revolutionary families," including those of North Vietnam Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) veterans, enjoy benefits not available to others. For the last twenty years, the ARVN veteran experience has roughly paralleled that of most other southerners; those with more education and more economic resources, including help from relatives overseas, have done better. End summary.

2. (SBU) Over the last two years, case workers in the Humanitarian Resettlement Section (HRS) have interviewed roughly two thousand former re-education camp inmates applying for Humanitarian Resettlement (HR) to the U.S. under the "HO" category. Most of those interviewed have been ARVN veterans and most of the information in this cable is drawn from those interviews. Geographically, those interviewed come from all over the southern half of Vietnam. Middle-ranking veterans -- NCOs, warrant officers, lieutenants, and captains -- are probably over-represented in this group because few enlisted soldiers were re-educated long enough to qualify for HO and few higher ranking veterans remain in Vietnam. Nonetheless, those interviewed do include a large number of former enlisted soldiers and a very small number who ranked from major to colonel. Those interviewed also include a large number of former police officers, but few ex-civil servants.

What has life been like for ARVN vets?

3. (U) After the Communist victory in 1975, the new government instructed ARVN veterans (among many others) to report for re-education. Some received rather perfunctory terms, while others served many years. Typically after release from re-education camp, veterans were directed to return home and report to local police for probation. Many were moved with their families to New Economic Zones (NEZs) where they completed their probation. Probation could last several years, but in most cases it was twelve months, after which veterans were able

to have their civil rights restored. This process sometimes took several more years. With restoration of civil rights, veterans were able to apply for identity cards and obtain family registration books. With these documents, they could obtain essentially the same services as any other Vietnamese citizen. In practice, it often took ARVN veterans considerably longer to obtain the documents, especially the family registration books. Many veterans were reluctant to make repeat visits to government offices to ask for documents or certification of papers, as this exposed them to reminders that authorities considered them to be "traitors."

¶4. (U) Frequently, attempts to obtain identification documents were fruitless. There are still a few ARVN veterans who have not received either document, which leaves them with limited livelihood options in the informal sector such as day laborer, motorcycle taxi driver, lottery ticket seller and small-scale vendor. Persons without ID cards cannot open bank accounts, or obtain government-subsidized health care and other routine public services. In contrast to ID cards, drivers' licenses are easily available through payment of bribes, but a driver's license is no substitute for an ID card.

¶5. (U) A larger set of veterans encounter difficulties obtaining family books. Issued by local authorities, family registration books are used to determine legal residence in Vietnam. When one moves from one part of Vietnam to another, one is supposed to obtain a new family book. Some ARVN veterans have given up trying to obtain their own book and have had their families registered in a relative's book. Lack of a family book makes it challenging to obtain services provided by local authorities. If one does not have a family book registered where one actually lives, it is difficult, among other things, to enroll one's children in local schools.

¶6. (SBU) Veterans reported that life in the NEZs tended to be harsher than elsewhere because NEZs were undeveloped, frequently

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on land of marginal quality, and because local officials often imposed heavy labor requirements on those they deemed in need of more "reform through labor." Although conditions generally became better over time, many NEZ residents left in the late 1980's through early 1990's in search of economic and educational opportunities and also to cut ties with their problematic pasts. Even veterans who were not sent to NEZs still left their homes to move to HCMC in an attempt to get away from local officials who held their pasts over their heads. About half of ARVN veterans interviewed for HR still lived in their pre-1975 communities. A handful moved to a different rural area, usually in the Central Highlands. The rest have either stayed in an NEZ or moved to a city.

What kinds of discrimination were there?

¶7. (SBU) Most ARVN veterans who reported blatant discrimination in the 1980s said that this faded to almost nothing by the mid-1990s. Few of them provide HRS interviewers details about the problems they faced in the past. Unless they could obtain civil documents, they were unable to work in the formal sector of the economy or to have land. The lack of civil documents also hampered access to education and health care. Community pressure, a tool that local authorities routinely mobilized in the past, made ARVN veterans social outcasts while venerating NVA and VC. These pressures led many with the means to do so to move to the city. Those who could not often withdrew from society and became dependent on their children.

¶8. (U) It has often been reported that the children of ARVN veterans face discrimination too, but it is clearer that poverty has been their main problem. Their parents' status probably exacerbated that poverty through the 1980s, in part because the lack of civil documents made access to health care and education more problematic, but veterans themselves seldom report that they are or were significantly poorer than their non-veteran neighbors. It was very common for their children to have

dropped out of school after two or three years, but when asked why, they report that it was because the children were needed to work and that the family could not afford to send them to school. Their non-veteran neighbors routinely had to make the same sacrifice. Veterans with more economic resources -- often relatives overseas -- could afford to keep their children in school through 12th grade. It is common for ARVN veterans and others to allege that their children have been unable to attend college because of "family background." Given the extreme competition for the few available college admissions slots in Vietnam, it is plausible that an ARVN family background is a negative factor, but it is difficult to determine whether it is decisive by itself.

¶9. (U) While relatively few senior ARVN officers remained in Vietnam after 1975, conversations with them and their children serve to illuminate how discrimination against the children of ARVN officers could flow from the policies described above. Because parents must present family registration documents when enrolling their children in public schools, for example, children of ARVN veterans faced additional challenges when attending school. The lack of family registration documents could lead to similar complications in obtaining health care. In practice, denials of access to education and health care appear to have varied by region as well as on a case-by-case basis and could be circumvented if a veteran's children could be added to the family registration book of a less disfavored relative. For those families who decided to return to the city rather than remain in one of the NEZ's, access to social services became doubly difficult since the family had no legal status in the city. Once again, however, ordinary Vietnamese, and even VC and NVA veterans, who fled Vietnam's economic backwaters for its growing cities faced and continue to face these problems as well. Whatever discrimination there was against ARVN veterans and their families gradually declined over time to the point where at least one son of an ARVN officer who was effectively denied schooling as a child in the late 1970's was nonetheless able to be hired as a teacher in the 1990's before going on to build a multi-million dollar business empire (ref A).

¶10. (SBU) ARVN veterans themselves have seldom found government employment, unless they supported the revolution before 1975 or had skills such as medical doctor or helicopter mechanic that were in short supply after 1975. Employment in sensitive positions and advancement to senior levels in routine government positions and in State-Owned Enterprises has only been open to Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) members. Only the former set of ARVN veterans have been able to join the CPV. The prohibition on CPV membership seems to hold true for the children of ARVN veterans as well. However, veterans and their children with some combination of financial resources, family overseas, and enterprise have been able to do well in the

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private sector, especially since 1994. The growth of the private sector and the rise of private universities have made discrimination in state employment and university entrance less significant. Post's own employees, including a sprinkling of ARVN veterans and many children of ARVN veterans, are another example; they are doing far better working for the USG than they likely would for their own government. Some ARVN veterans have become millionaires (reftels). At least one HR applicant ARVN veteran has too. He asked his interviewer for advice on moving his multi-million dollar fortune to the United States.

What kind of discrimination is there now?

¶11. (U) Perhaps the starkest differences in treatment ARVN veterans see is in how they fare compared to VC and NVA veterans. The latter are considered to belong to "revolutionary families" that are given many preferences by the GVN. With an officially revered status, disabled revolutionary veterans receive an array of official and semi-official support and recognition. Aside from the privately-funded Tu Duc village in Ho Chi Minh City, there are no known special social services

available to disabled ARVN veterans, and public recognition of their losses and sacrifices seems to be considered too sensitive to permit. The large majority of disabled ARVN veterans are dependent solely on their families for support. ARVN veterans often say they find it particularly galling that they get no government assistance because of their disabilities, while revolutionary veterans do. Similarly, the numerous social activities for revolutionary veterans simply do not exist for ARVN veterans. Many ARVN veterans are comfortable getting together and quietly reminiscing, but these are very low key events compared to the boisterous song (and drink)-filled reunions of their erstwhile opponents. While revolutionary veterans are prominently featured in public and the media on national holidays, there is virtually no official public recognition that ARVN veterans exist.

¶12. (SBU) The majority of ARVN veterans interviewed in the last two years report little if any overt discrimination since the mid-1990s when compared to the general population. As long as they do not do anything "foolish," authorities treat them the same as other citizens. However, an identifiable minority still reports that local authorities discriminate against them. Most of this segment lives in the central provinces stretching from Quang Ngai north through Quang Tri; others are from economic backwaters of the Mekong Delta. Discrimination tends to be especially strong in old VC strongholds and former NEZs. They can still face a gauntlet of unpleasant treatment when gathering the documents for Humanitarian Resettlement. It appears that local officials in these places still regard ARVN veterans as traitors or potential traitors, particularly when they apply for Humanitarian Resettlement. Two common features of these rural localities are that they have enjoyed little economic development and that local security officials have little to do.

By contrast, police and local officials in the cities and other economically vibrant areas are so busy that they either are scarcely aware of ARVN veterans as such, or they do not seem to consider ARVN veterans to be of much interest. Veterans who could afford to do so have moved away from repressive localities to places offering more economic opportunity and more anonymity.

Those remaining, aside from being poor, find it difficult to blend in and escape the notice of security officials who may have been on the other side of the battlefield during the war.

Other factors

¶13. (U) The consequences of past discrimination coupled with the difficult circumstances faced by the general population in the 1980s and early 1990s bear on the present situation of ARVN veterans. Hardships abounded in Vietnam only a few years ago and impacted most people in most places, not just ARVN veterans.

Dropping out of school for economic reasons was and still is a widespread problem, especially in rural areas where families need their children to work to support the family. Among the ranks of ARVN veterans, enlisted soldiers and NCOs tended to be poor and so their children often had only two or three years of school. Officers' families tended to be wealthier, so their children usually completed high school. The lack of past education limits current economic opportunities much more clearly than family background.

¶14. (SBU) ARVN veterans often say there is a widespread bias against them and their children in job placement, hiring, and access to economic opportunities and favors. If one probes the question more deeply, they usually attribute their troubles to their lack of ties to influential individuals with access to good jobs and powerful people, rather than their ARVN service or family background. Other southerners, from ordinary citizens to members of "revolutionary families," commonly voice a similar complaint, namely that there is favoritism towards those who

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have relationships with "decision makers," in other words, "northerners."

¶15. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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